



# Mental Readiness for Basic Training

Workbook



Road to Mental Readiness  
En route vers la préparation mentale



Défense nationale  
National Defence

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# Introduction

## **Congratulations on your decision to join the Canadian Armed Forces!**

In addition to getting yourself physically ready for basic training, it is also important to get yourself mentally prepared.

### **Mental preparation will help you to:**

- Perform at your best under pressure
- Manage obstacles and stress
- Regulate your emotions, and
- Develop confidence and focus

In fact, part of your basic training will include learning and applying key mental skills that will optimize your performance as a military member.

Just as with physical preparation, there are some things you can do ahead of time to help you perform at your best right from the moment you arrive at the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School.

You can use this workbook on its own or, if you prefer, you can watch the educational videos that accompany each of the sections. These videos are designed to explain some of the concepts in greater detail.



# Your “Why” Matters

When faced with challenges, understanding the purpose and importance of your actions can significantly enhance your performance. Individuals with a strong sense of purpose and meaning tend to cope better with stress, recover more quickly from setbacks, and remain motivated and engaged in pursuing their goals.

As you prepare for basic training, take the time to reflect on why you have decided to join the Canadian Armed Forces. Identifying these reasons will help you establish a sense of meaning and purpose in this pursuit. This will help you stay focused and manage feelings of frustration and anxiety as you encounter challenges during your training.

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **Motivation and Performance***



## INTRINSIC VS EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic motivation comes from doing something because you enjoy it or find it satisfying. The activity itself is the reward. For example, playing sports because it makes you feel good, or studying because you're interested in the topic.

Extrinsic motivation is about doing something to get a reward or avoid a punishment. You do it not because you like it, but because you want something in return or want to avoid something bad. For example, working to earn money, or studying to get a good grade.

In basic training, both types of motivation are important. Intrinsic motivation helps you stay engaged and committed to the training. Extrinsic motivation gives you a short-term boost to reach specific goals.

# Your “Why” Matters

## Mental Preparation Activity

Take a moment to write down the answers to these questions:

1. Why am I joining the CAF?

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2. What am I hoping to do and accomplish in my military career?

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3. Why is this important to me?

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# Understanding Stress

When you think about the word “stress,” what comes to mind? For many people, stress is associated with negativity and something to be avoided. However, what they are actually describing is distress. The term “stress” simply refers to the body’s response to changes in the environment. Stress is a necessary part of life and can be positive and beneficial when it motivates you to achieve more or fosters positive change. In this way, basic training is designed to create stress by challenging you to adapt to the changes in your new environment, learn and grow.

When individuals experience stress, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, they experience physiological and emotional changes that can affect their performance. The stress response is the body’s defence response system that has been termed “fight, flight or freeze.” When the brain detects something new or threatening in the environment it sends stress hormones into the bloodstream to quickly prepare the body for action, increasing breathing, heart rate and blood pressure. You may start to sweat or notice feelings of tension in your muscles and abdomen. While this is the body’s way of providing you the energy you need to react to the situation, it is common to interpret these changes negatively, further increasing the stress response to a level that makes it difficult to perform. Accompanying these physiological changes, individuals experience a range of emotions including feelings of confusion, frustration, anxiety or a sense of being overwhelmed.

Situations during basic training that can enact the stress response vary for each individual. Common situations that can create stress include completing physically demanding tasks, exposure to new people, living in a new environment, feeling rushed, exposure to inclement weather conditions, receiving negative feedback, experiencing failures or setbacks, or having to follow orders and new routines.

You will experience stress at some point in basic training. Understanding ahead of time why you are experiencing stress and how your body reacts to stress can help you to maintain performance. It can also help you recognize when you would benefit from employing some key mental skills to help you cope with the stress and prevent it from impacting your performance.

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **Stress and Performance***

# Understanding Stress

## Mental Preparation Activity

Take a moment to write down the answers to these questions:

**1. What are some situations that I might encounter in basic training that would cause me to experience stress?**

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**2. When I experience stress, what physical changes do I notice in myself?**

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**3. When I experience stress, what emotional changes do I notice in myself?**

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# Effective Coping

Coping strategies are actions that you can take to manage stress and maintain performance. Throughout your life you have used many different strategies to deal with the various challenges you have faced.

## REFLECT

Think of a situation in the past that was stressful, but you managed to push through and adapt to the change(s) in your life. What was the situation? What did you do to cope?

Many of the strategies you have used in the past will be beneficial during basic training and throughout your military career. However, some of these strategies may not be as helpful, particularly during the 8 weeks of your basic training. For instance, taking a break or going for a walk when feeling overwhelmed might not be feasible, and reaching out to a friend for advice may be more challenging. To help you explore additional or alternative coping strategies, we have included a few key techniques that have been proven to optimize performance. These skills are used by elite performers in the military and other fields, including professional sports.

## 1. Develop a positive mindset.

Everyone experiences ongoing chatter in their heads - those things you say to yourself, called self-talk. However, for many individuals, this inner dialogue tends to be negative and overly critical. Negative self-talk can be one of the biggest barriers to success during basic training. Thoughts like *"I can't do this," "I won't make it,"* and *"I am not good enough"* can derail performance, increase distress, and distract you from the task at hand.

## REFLECT

Take a moment and consider when you are the most self-critical. What are some of the common negative messages you say to yourself?

# Effective Coping

It is important to remember that just because you think something, it does not make it true. Often, the negative messages you give yourself are simply false. Furthermore, even if what you are saying to yourself is true, it is probably not helping you perform any better. Recognizing and gaining control over your negative thinking can make a significant difference during basic training.

There are a few key strategies that can help you do this:

- i. Simply notice when you are experiencing negative emotions and ask yourself what you were thinking just prior to this experience.
- ii. Replace these thoughts by:
  - a. Developing some positive statements that you can use to replace those negative thoughts that creep in to your mind while you are trying to perform well. Examples include “*I got this,*” “*This is challenging but I can get through it,*” or “*I am capable.*” These phrases should be short, positive and meaningful for you.
  - b. Walking yourself through the task at hand.
  - c. Asking yourself: *Is this thought true? Is it helpful?*

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **Helpful Self-Talk***

## WHY OUR DEFAULT MESSAGES ARE NEGATIVE

Our inner thoughts aren't always helpful and can often be quite negative. This is because of something called negativity bias. Negativity bias means that negative experiences affect us more strongly than positive or neutral ones, even if they are just as intense. In other words, something very positive will usually have less impact on our behavior and thinking than something equally emotional but negative.

This bias is part of our natural survival instinct, which helps us prepare for future threats or learn from past mistakes to avoid repeating them. However, since this is our default setting, we need to consciously work to overcome negativity bias when it doesn't help us or gets in the way of our performance.

# Effective Coping

## Mental Preparation Activity

Start developing your positive mindset before you arrive at basic training by engaging in the following activities.

**1. Keep a thought journal. Note when your mood changes and what you were thinking just beforehand. Then try to challenge these thoughts by asking yourself “Is it true?” and “Is it helpful?” Try to replace the problematic thought with something that is more accurate and constructive.**

**2. Create a list of positive statements you will use to help you block out negativity. Write these down and then try using them daily so they become more automatic by the time you start basic training.**

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**Below are some additional strategies that can help you develop a positive mindset:**

- Take note of three good things at the end of each day, however small they are.
- Try to find humour in challenging situations.
- Focus on the present moment or task. Avoid ruminating on past mistakes or worrying about the future.
- Seek out other positive people to support and encourage you.

# Effective Coping

## 2. Practice strategies to reduce stress and physical activation.

When individuals experience too much, it can make performing effectively more difficult. Therefore, it can help to learn and use strategies that can reduce stress levels.

### REFLECT

When you are feeling the physical symptoms of stress, how do you work to calm your body and mind?

One key strategy to quickly and effectively gain control of stress is to engage in a type of breathing called tactical breathing. Tactical breathing engages the diaphragm and slows your breath to increase the flow of blood and oxygen to your brain and body, provide more 'fuel' to your muscles, and allow the heart to beat less quickly and with less effort.

#### To engage in tactical breathing:

1. Expand the abdomen on inhale, engaging the diaphragm and completely filling the lungs with air.
2. Pause prior to exhalation.
3. Contract the abdomen on exhale, completely emptying the lungs of air.
4. Focus on slow inhalations and long, slow exhalations.
5. Repeat.

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **Tactical Breathing***

# Effective Coping

## **Mental Preparation Activity**

To fully benefit from this strategy during basic training, it is important to practice and master the technique before you come to the training and prior to using it in stressful situations.

**1. Start by practicing the breathing technique once per day for five minutes when you are feeling relatively calm. A good time would be prior to falling asleep; however, you can choose the time that works for you. If you have a smart watch, try checking your heart rate prior to starting the practice and again after to see if you were able to lower it. If you are struggling to master the technique, try downloading our R2MR mobile application and select tactical breathing for further coaching and assistance.**

**2. After one week, begin using tactical breathing during your day when you feel your stress levels elevated, and when it is possible to engage in the technique for 2-5 minutes. Again, track your heart rate changes.**

**3. As you become more practiced at lowering your heart rate, use tactical breathing more frequently when you feel your stress levels elevate, and see if you can achieve a reduction in stress with only engaging in a few deep breaths.**

# Effective Coping

## 3. Set small realistic goals.

Goal setting provides a systematic approach to breaking challenges down into manageable actionable tasks. This gives you a level of control over the situation and prevents you from becoming overwhelmed. During basic training, the trick is to focus your attention on what is immediately required of you, instead of getting overly focused on passing the course, the ultimate outcome goal. Too much focus on the outcome goal can be overwhelming, instead by focusing on each of the small steps required to get your there is more helpful.

A great technique that can help you is to repeatedly ask yourself: “What’s Important Now” or WIN. The acronym WIN allows the brain to key in on the very next thing that needs to be done. Using WIN, you are forced to focus on what is important at a particular moment in time, enabling you to prioritize your actions.

Another goal setting technique that can be helpful is to set SMART goals. This technique reduces stress by providing you direction and aligns your actions with what you want to achieve. It helps to manage workload, reduces feelings of frustration and anxiety, promotes healthy coping, and helps to sustain your motivation and self-confidence.



# Effective Coping

SMART stands for:

**S**

**Specific:** define what you want to accomplish and where.  
*Ask: What? Where?*

**M**

**Measurable:** determine concrete criteria for measuring progress.  
*Ask: How many? How often?*

**A**

**Attainable:** ensuring you have the information and resources necessary to achieve the goal.  
*Ask: Is it possible to achieve? Do I have the necessary information and resources?*

**R**

**Relevant:** ensure it is either desirable or necessary.  
*Ask: Why? Do I want or need to do this?*

**T**

**Time-bound:** ensure it is grounded in a timeframe.  
*Ask: By when?*

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **SMART Goal Setting***

# Effective Coping

## **Mental Preparation Activity**

Getting practice using these techniques ahead of time, will help you to use them effectively during basic training.

**1. Set SMART goals for things you want to accomplish in advance of basic training. For example, maybe you want to improve your physical fitness now. Use the SMART criteria to help you along your fitness journey.**

**2. Practice breaking things down into small manageable components now using WIN. Throughout your day, ask your: What's Important Now and refocus your attention on the next thing that needs to be done.**

# Effective Coping

## 4. Use visualization to prepare for upcoming stressors.

Visualization, also known as imagery or mental rehearsal, is the process of creating or recreating a sensory experience in your mind. This technique is helpful because by mentally rehearsing how you would manage an upcoming stressful situation, you will have less of a stressful reaction when you face the stressor in real life. It is like your brain says, “*Oh yes, I have seen this before, I know what to do.*” To get the most from visualization, you want to make sure the images you create are as realistic and vivid as possible.

### You can do this by:

1. Beginning relaxed.
2. Creating the image in your mind by including all of your senses: sights, sounds, smell, touch and feelings
3. Keep it simple and not trying to overcomplicate it.
4. Replacing negative thoughts with positive ones and seeing yourself successfully managing the stressor.

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **How to visualize***



# Effective Coping

## **Mental Preparation Activity**

Like the other skills mentioned so far, the more you practice using visualization, the better you will get at it. Doing this ahead of time will allow you to use this skill effectively during basic training.

**1. Try to create vivid images using items and situations that you are very familiar with, such as a room in your home or a sport you play. It is easier to master this skill if you start with things you know. Try making these images as real as possible, using all of your senses. See if you can get a clear image.**

**2. Next, start using this technique to manage your daily tasks. In the morning, try picturing various aspects of your day. See yourself engaging successfully in the tasks you have ahead of yourself.**

**3. Finally, begin to create images of yourself successfully accomplishing tasks during basic training. See yourself arriving in this new setting, wearing a uniform, completing physical training tasks. While you may not have a lot of detail to work with, you can start to visualize the feelings of success and pushing yourself through challenging situations.**

# Effective Coping

## 5. Accept that things will be different and you will have less control over your daily tasks.

In basic training, many aspects of your day and the training itself are not within your control. This includes the schedule (such as wake-up times, mealtimes, or when you are required to attend classes or participate in physical training), training activities (such as the drills, lectures, or exercises you must complete), the training environment (such as the location or weather conditions occurring during various activities), discipline (such as the rules and regulations required of you, or the consequences of not following these), the actions of other trainees (such as who is in your platoon or your roommate, their attitude or performance), or your instructors.

In essence, you can't control many of the external factors of basic training. Here is where the skill of acceptance can be helpful. Acceptance simply means acknowledging the reality of a situation without resisting or denying the experience, then shifting your attention to what you can influence.

### You practice acceptance by:

1. Acknowledging your reality and your emotions. Remind yourself that, in this moment, reality can't be changed, and the causes of this reality are outside of your control. As frustration or anger often accompany these types of situations, it can be helpful to name your emotions and observe where in your body you are experiencing them, without judging them as "good" or "bad".
2. Taking a step back from the situation to distance yourself from the thoughts and feelings involved by selecting quick strategies such as taking a tactical breath or using positive self-talk to rapidly shift your focus back to the task at hand.
3. Refocus your attention on what you can control or influence, such as your actions, behaviour, effort or attitude. Make a deliberate choice to focus on what you can do (What's important now?), such as refocusing on the task at hand or an action that you can take to move forward.

# Effective Coping

## Mental Preparation Activity

1. While awaiting your training, begin to pay attention to times when you do not have control over a situation.

2. Take a moment to acknowledge the situation and identify how you are feeling.

3. Take a deep tactical breath to reduce any stress you are feeling.

4. Ask yourself what you have control over or use the WIN technique to refocus your efforts on what you do control.

# Effective Coping

## 6. Be prepared to manage setbacks.

A setback is simply an event that delays progress or reverses some of the progress that has been made. Setbacks are normal and occur frequently in basic training. Setbacks are an important part of life experiences, but they often don't feel very good. For many people, the hardest part about experiencing a setback is figuring out how to move forward.

### REFLECT

Take a moment and consider how you have managed setbacks in the past. What did it feel like? How did you move forward?

Following a setback you need to engage in proper post-performance reflection. Reflection involves thinking about your experiences with the intent of learning something.

**CORE** is a tool you can use to help you do this effectively:

**C**

**Control:** recognize the aspects of the situation you have control over.  
*Ask: What do I control?*

**O**

**Ownership:** take responsibility for problem-solving.  
*Ask: What can I learn from this?*

**R**

**Reach:** consider what needs to change.  
*Ask: What can I do differently next time?*

**E**

**Endurance:** create a plan using SMART goal setting.  
*Ask: What information, skills, or strategies do I need?*

*Interested in learning more?*

*Watch the video: **Setback Management***

# Effective Coping

## Mental Preparation Activity

1. Think of a time when you experienced a setback. Re-create this experience in your mind. Then list the specific factors that contributed to you experiencing this setback.

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2. Apply the CORE tool to this situation: Control, Ownership, Reach, Endurance.

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3. Develop a plan on how you will use this technique to bounce back from setbacks experienced during basic training.

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# Effective Coping

## 7. Look to expand your support network.

It is common to feel isolated despite being surrounded by many people while at basic training. Arriving in a new environment, with less access to the friends and family who normally provide you support, can be challenging.

### REFLECT

Think of a time when you had to meet new people or make new friends in the past. Maybe you moved homes, joined a new team or club, or changed schools. How easy or challenging was it for you to make new connections? What worked in the past?

If meeting new people or making new friends is challenging for you, it is important to develop strategies ahead of time that will help you.

Success at basic training does not happen alone. Teamwork is key and you may find yourself working alongside of individuals that you would not have otherwise chosen. Practicing your social skills ahead of time can help you manage these challenges.

### TIPS TO EXPAND YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

**Actively participate.** Engage in training activities, group projects, and discussions to interact with your fellow trainees.

**Initiate conversations.** Don't be afraid to start conversations with course mates, share your experiences, and learn about their backgrounds.

**Be respectful.** Practice active listening and engage in respectful communication, even when you disagree.

**Be approachable and friendly.** Project a positive attitude and be open to meeting new people.

**Give and seek support.** Be willing to assist others and offer your support when needed. Reach out when you need assistance.

**Be a team player.** Collaborate effectively on tasks, supporting others and building a sense of teamwork.

# Effective Coping

## Mental Preparation Activity

1. Pay attention to how you interact with others. Consider: How well do you listen? Are you able to give and receive feedback calmly? Does your communication change when you are tired or frustrated?
2. Practice using strategies to manage your negative emotions, such as tactical breathing or self-talk, prior to engaging in difficult conversations.
3. If socializing is difficult for you, practice engaging in conversations with others. Use opportunities such as shopping or other public situations to engage in small talk and make eye contact.
4. If this is a significant challenge for you, perhaps seek additional resources to help you prior to arriving at basic training.

# Conclusion

That concludes the list of effective coping strategies that will help you to perform at your best during basic training. If you are concerned about your ability to cope effectively with stress or are struggling with any mental health concerns that may interfere with your success, now is the time to reach out for help.

If you would like more strategies to assist you, consider downloading our R2MR mobile application. This tool further explains many of the skills listed in this workbook, as well as provides a mental health continuum tool to help you check on your own mental health status to determine if you might benefit from further support.

You and your family can also access a wide range of helpful tools and information through our *R2MR for Family Life* website. This site offers valuable insights into military life, strategies for managing stress, and a variety of support resources tailored for families.

Visit [www.r2mrfamily.ca](http://www.r2mrfamily.ca) to explore everything it has to offer!



## REMEMBER!

- It is common and expected to experience stress on basic training.
- Follow instructions from the instructors and staff.
- Basic training is temporary.
- Basic training is difficult. However, many other people have successfully completed it and so can you!



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